

University of Scranton Black Student Union Interview

Interview with: Amaya Brown, Class of 2023

Interviewer: Koebe Diaz

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Archives Note: Transcripts may contain spelling or formatting errors due to audio issues or automation software errors.

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KD: Hi, thank you for agreeing to sit down and do this interview as a part of the Black Archives research I'm doing. Before we begin, I just want to let you know that this interview is not anonymous and will be recorded and put into the archives. The goal of this interview is for you to share your experiences as honestly as possible so that it can become a part of the University's Archives, and so that others can understand your experiences. This interview is not for publication purposes but some parts of this interview will be used as a part of a presentation I'll be making later this month. If you wish for your name to not be shared at that presentation, that is totally okay. We are not certain at this time who will be present at this presentation besides committee members of the Institutional Black History Subcommittee. Faculty, staff and students will be invited to come, as well as the President of the University and other stakeholders. Would you like to continue on in this interview?

AB: Yes.

KD: Can I use your name and story as a part of the presentation?

AB: Yes.

KD: Okay, thank you. Please say your name, year, where you're from, and your cultural and ethnic background and any leadership roles that you hold on campus.

AB: Hi, my name is Amaya Brown. I'm a Bio/Pre-Med major and I graduate in 2023 and...what else did you say? Sorry.

KD: Where you're from, your cultural and ethnic background...

AB: I am from New Jersey and I'm Jamaican.

KD: Okay, and any leadership roles you have on campus?

AB: No.

KD: Okay. Okay, so my first question to get us started is can you identify a low and a high point during your time here at the University in regards to being a black student?

AB: Okay, so when I first came here I felt as though it was hard connecting with people outside of my roommate because I knew my roommate since high school and she's usually the one I cling to because I didn't know who would accept as a black person because it is a white community and I feel like before seeing you as a person they see that your black because your kind of like not...you kind of stand out because it's just like I feel as though they don't know necessarily how to approach me as a person. Yeah, so I feel like that's one of the lows...just getting to know other people besides the black community on campus and then I think the best part about my experience just coming in was finding the United Cultural Organization because it was a mix of people...not only just colored people but also white people are allowed to be in there so I feel like that's how I met a lot of my white connections besides, you know...the colored people of campus which I really appreciated about that.

KD: Yeah, can you talk more about your experiences like trying to connect and socialize with white students?

AB: Okay, so I feel as though socializing with the white population here...I have to tone back on just the way I talk because I kind of talk in a non-formal way when I'm talking to other people but I feel as though with the white population just the way I talk to my teachers I have to talk to them to be more proper and to be more accepted because I don't want to talk too much like a stereotypical black person. Or I don't want to be too expressive where they...quote-on-quote aggressive or just too assertive as a black woman.

KD: Yeah, and can you think of any times where students may have made you feel like that was the case?

AB: I would say...this was in my dorm. I was having a conversation with a friend. Well, we're no longer friends at the moment, but it was about during the election time and we were talking about the candidates and how people were talking about just racial injustices and how they would only vote for this person because, you know, they're the better of the worst options like treating the minority with equality and stuff like that. And then he made a comment saying that he doesn't see why people are talking about race, that it had nothing to do with race. And to me just as a black person, just knowing that because I'm black I have to work twice as hard...that was really offensive. And he didn't get it. I tried...kept explaining myself that just because you don't experience it, that doesn't mean it doesn't exist. Because you're not bounded by being a white person doesn't mean that a black person is not bounded by being black.

KD: Yeah. What drove you to stay here at the University with the lows that you were talking about?

AB: I would say again just having the UCO and then the BSU that was just formed, I feel like...just having that connection with them because the colored people on campus, if I'm being honest, would be like my safe space. Not saying I don't talk to the white community. I do, but it's just a different type of safety when I'm with people who can relate to my struggles.

KD: Yeah, and could you speak more on what being a part of these clubs have meant to you?

AB: Okay, so I would say when you see...well I feel like people group minorities a lot together, especially just being black. I feel like everybody thinks that every black person has the same exact black experiences and just being a part of clubs like BSU...you just learn you're Jamaican, you're Trinidadian, you're Black African-American, you're born here...you get to learn the different cultures, where they're from, what their traditions and moral are, how they defer...just stuff like that and I really appreciate the different perspectives coming from different students and, again, just reinforcing that there's not just only one idea of a black identity. There's multiple and everyone is different in some way.

KD: Yeah, thank you. So, you started here in 2019?

AB: Yeah.

KD: How has your experience changed here since the events of 2020...like the summer of 2020, George Floyd, the BLM protests, all that?

AB: I think around the time of the protests I was more scared. Well, coming in in general is just scary but I knew what I was coming into. But when the protests kicked off and everything...you don't know whose...I feel like being racist in this time is more covered up. So, you just don't know who to trust, essentially. I didn't want to be outside as much. I was just crazy. It was just protests. Even on the street, there was this protest going on everywhere and it was getting loud and rowdy and again, not just even the community...not the University community alone is mainly not blacks but outside of the University as well. So, just walking down the street as a woman, you don't really have much to protect yourself because we're not aloud to have certain things on campus to protect yourselves. So, it's just like...that was scary in general. So, most of the time I was just in. And then also I think I was kind of offended with the University not saying anything about students wearing the MAGA hats because, you know, it's tied to confederacy and I'm a black person and the Confederates wanted to protect slavery so that's kind of scary just to see.

KD: Yeah, and can you say more about that like with the use of...students using MAGA hats and Trump flags and Confederate flags and what that means to black students?

AB: Okay, so to me when you don't address things like that, it's just saying that it's okay. It's okay to accept the idea that people wanted slaves. You wanted to keep me in a specific spot. You didn't want me to grow, you didn't want me to progress, and then it just feels like I shouldn't be here because it's just that black people have a certain position in society. There are supposed to be down and then the whites are like the hierarchy. So, if you're wearing a MAGA hat, it just like I'm underneath you...like I'm not on the same level as you. I'm not supposed to be here. I'm not as good as you to get this education. I should be working underneath your level and I can't be just a person. I can't be here just to learn just like you. I'm just always going to be like a minority.

KD: Yeah, and what's your opinion on how the University handles things like that? Or even what you were saying before about like how every black person is different and every black experience is different...how the University addresses issues like that too?

AB: I don't think the University really addresses specific issues in a way that's really progressive. I feel like they just send emails out...mass emails...and the way I see it is that you can...everyone can just swipe off the email. You don't open it, you don't have to read it. I feel like they should...moving forward...hopefully they promote more events like have classes where you can learn...even like have it as a requirement. You know how Theology is a requirement? I feel like just learning...especially since they're not around a lot of diversity...just having classes, being required to learn that is very important...just to know how to communicate and interact with your black community and just minorities in general.

KD: Thank you. What...have you ever experienced on campus or even off campus any forms of racial discrimination and, if you did, did you report it?

AB: I think the one time I felt like this University staff said something to me that was racially motivated was in the Pod shop. I went to get snacks and stuff. It was raining outside so I had my hoodie on and a lot of people had their hoodies on in the shop. Again, it's raining out. It's pouring outside and I went to ring out my stuff and she told me to take my hoodie off or "I can't ring you out" or something like that. And I was just...I was shocked. I just took it off because I was just in shock at the moment. I didn't really think anything of it until I was talking to my friends. I'm like "Hey, I'm not the only one with a hoodie on." She didn't tell no one to take their hoodie off but me. And I was just like "That can't be a coincidence", especially since, you know, a black person in a hoodie is just threatening in America. So that was just scary seeing that a staff member is perpetuating that same ideal. But no, I didn't report it. I don't know why I didn't report it. But yeah, that was very off-putting for me.

KD: That was going to be my second question. Why not report it?

AB: I don't know. Maybe because I just feel like... people might think I'm being overdramatic over hoodies. The thing I'm always scared of is that like "it's just a hoodie", "maybe she's having a bad day", "maybe she didn't mean it like that". I'm just scared of those responses.

KD: And who do you think you'd be getting...where do you think those responses would be coming from?

AB: I would say the administratives...whoever is in charge of just...attending to racial injustices. I feel like they wouldn't...I feel like some people just don't get the importance of what certain things mean to being a black person in general. A hoodie might not mean nothing to you because you're not judged for just being black or just wearing a hoodie down the street. But for me it's a bigger deal.

KD: Yeah, yeah. Thank you. And do you know of anyone who has reported anything?

AB: No.

KD: And do you know of people who have experienced other forms of discrimination?

AB: No.

KD: Okay. What would you say...I mean, you somewhat touched on this a little bit earlier, but what would you say the support is like on campus for you as a black student?

AB: I don't know. I think we need more support. I appreciate the clubs and stuff like that but just more support from higher-ups...just knowing that if something happens to me, I don't have to be scared to let you know. Like I was saying, I don't have to feel scared of responses like "Oh, maybe they didn't mean it like that" ...like you downplaying my emotions, seeing me as being overdramatic. So, I think if I could confide in administrators, I would feel more safe in a space like this.

KD: And do you have any supports now that you go to outside of the student clubs you mentioned?

AB: The support I would say is from my friends...just from the colored people that I'm friends with. I don't know if that's...is that the correct term to use? But yeah, just people who are like me, that I can relate to...I feel like they're my support group. If something happens, I could just go to them and talk about it. Faculty-wise I don't really talk to much faculty. Recently, though, I think one person that I could confide in...like two people I could confide in...is, I would say, Dr. Hoskins. She's one of the new black faculty staff here. And then I have a History teacher...I'm bad with names...but my History teacher as well. I appreciated her because she's a part of...she teaches Woman History. I appreciated her because when she was talking just woman in general, she brought up the black woman and she didn't water down the situation [unclear]. She made it known that it was harder...a harder fight for them just as a woman in society which I really appreciated.

KD: Yeah, and what is your experience as a black woman on campus?

AB: I would say...I'm going to relate it to my major. In STEM, just being a woman in general is less popular, I would say. But being black also does not help that situation because when it comes to group assignments and labs and stuff like that I feel like everybody...when I say everybody I mean I'm like the only black person in class. So, every white student gravitates towards each other. And no one really...I'm usually the last person to find a partner. I'm also really nervous and shy so that doesn't really help the case at all. And it's just like why am not a first choice? Are you scared that you can't relate to me, or am I not good enough to be here? Am I not as smart as you? Why don't you want to...you know, work with me? So...yeah.

KD: Yeah, it makes you second-guess your abilities.

AB: Yeah. And also, a part of that second-guessing is because, again, it's mostly a white population. It's just that I'm a part of your quota. I'm a part of meeting your diversity. At least,

that's what my mind is going towards, and I'm pretty sure that's how a lot of other people feel. So, yeah, it just makes you work twice as hard in class or just trying to prove that you're supposed to be here trying to prove that you're, you know, I could do just as good as you. It has nothing to do with me being black. So, yeah.

KD: Yeah, so you were talking a bit about having to or feeling like you have to prove something to the campus and...what kind of toll has that played on you emotionally or mentally?

AB: Mentally it's draining because I have days where I'm just doing bad. I'm just not doing as well on a certain subject in class and just down and it's like maybe I'm not that smart. Maybe I just got these scholarships and these grants because, you know, I'm black and I should just accept that and push it...keep it forward. And it really sucks to think like that. And even my Dad...even coming here and knowing what the population was like, he's like "You have to stay on top of everything, you have to work harder than your peer...going out in the world, you're going to be seen as a black person before you're seen for your credentials." So that also plays on my mental being here.

KD: And where do you go for support through that?

AB: I just...I kind of internalize it, which is not good. But I do. I just stay by myself...try to listen to music. Sometimes I talk to my Mom and, again, my friend group...the side of my friend group that's black as well. But most of the times I do internalize it which kind of sucks. Maybe I should...maybe I should talk about it. But, yeah...

KD: What about your experience socially here? What has that been like as a black student?

AB: Socially...can you elaborate please?

KD: Yeah, I guess like outside of UCO and the BSU, what has it been like in trying to socialize with other non-black students?

AB: I think some students just talk normal. They just talk to you as a person. They don't see color. Well, I'm not going to say they don't see color. They don't try to change the way they talk because they're talking to you. And then the other side of the population is...they do. Like this one experience I had at work...I was working at Starbuck's and my employee...one of my co-workers she came in and then...she was new and I guess she was trying to warm up to me, but then she started talking in a black-set, which really threw me off. I don't like that. So, it's half and half. Half of the population approach me as a person, the other half just try to have this black-set...this idea of me which I don't like. Just talk to me because I'm just me. I don't know.

KD: I want to ask if you could say something to...like a piece of advice...to an incoming black student, what would it be?

AB: I would say don't be discouraged by not seeing a lot of people like you, because they are and just try to find the clubs like I did, but also don't refrain from, you know, making friends outside of those clubs. Try to...I won't say educate because people are allowed...should educate themselves, but if you feel uncomfortable speak up about it. Try to not only put yourself out there for the population of just black students but also white students because they can't learn if they're not around you. You can't refrain from them. At that point, you might as well just be separate. So, we're trying to work on just being inclusive and I feel like a part of that is also you putting yourself out there and try to talk to them. Yeah.

KD: I'm not sure if I already asked you this, but why did you stay at the University?

AB: Because I feel like I got comfortable over a period of time. A big part of that is also my friend group...both white and black, the ones that are, you know, just see me as me and not whatever. My friend group really helped me settle in. I would say...yeah, that's the major reason I stayed and the clubs that I've joined.

KD: Yeah.

AB: There is one faculty member...well, she's not here anymore...but she also...she's a...I don't know if she's a minority but she's not necessarily black but she also...I used to talk to her. She's probably the reason why I stayed here. So...yeah.

KD: Did you ever consider leaving?

AB: Did I ever consider leaving? Yeah. Yeah. The thing is...coming here knowing that you're the minority in the population...that the majority's white...is different than being. So, when I was here I was like "I'm ready to go" especially when I couldn't connect outside of my roommate like I said. When I couldn't connect other than my roommate, I was ready to go. Then I just had a conversation with my Mom and she's just like "You know, just don't...". I feel like I also have an idea in my head of what...I don't know if I should say this. I have an idea of what white people are supposed to be like and I knew to get rid of that and, you know, just talk and be myself. So...yeah.

KD: Well, thank you. Is there anything else you'd like to say, any stories, anything at all you'd like the Archives to know?

AB: No, I don't think so...sorry.

KD: No, thank you. This was great. Thank you so much.

AB: No problem.